

To prevent Iran's nuclear breakout, Trump must confront a messy reality: diplomacy

By Amy J. Nelson | March 25, 2025



Then-US Secretary of State John Kerry sits with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif for a one-on-one chat before a broader meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 30, 2015, at the outset of the latest round in the P5+1 negotiations about the future of Iran's nuclear program. Only patient diplomacy made it possible to secure the Iran nuclear deal. (Photo: State Department, via Flickr)

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Centrifuges are operating around the clock in Iran, enriching uranium and bringing Tehran closer and closer to acquiring nuclear weapons—seven of them, a **new report** warns. The Trump administration is keenly aware of the urgency posed by Iran's nuclear capacity and **wants** to exert “maximum pressure” on Tehran while also pursuing a new arms control deal. Iran has **refused to negotiate** with the United States under these conditions.

Early March, President Donald Trump **sent a letter** to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, offering to jump-start nuclear talks. The letter reportedly included a **60-day deadline** for reaching a new nuclear deal. Again, Iran **rejected** the US offer as deceptive and a threat. Now, the US administration is openly floating the idea of **military action**—possibly in addition to the direct military actions President Trump has already ordered on the Houthis, the Zaydi Shia Islamist political and military organization that emerged in Yemen in the 1990s with Iran's sponsorship.

This kind of pressure could, in theory, eventually drive the country to the arms control negotiation table. But given the current reality—a more nuclear Iran and a less trustworthy United States—US leadership and the American public need to adjust their expectations. To rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions before it is too late, the Trump administration must ditch its obsession with all-or-nothing absolutism and quick wins. Instead, it must learn to master the art of strategic compromise—because only patient diplomacy can secure some modicum of enduring security.

The art of the nuclear deal. In 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) curbed Iran's nuclear ambitions with a blend of carrots and sticks. The JCPOA—also known as the Iran nuclear deal—was signed by the permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany (P5+1) and Iran. It provided sanctions relief to Iran in exchange for verified compliance with a comprehensive agreement to limit the country's nuclear program. The agreement required Iran to reduce uranium enrichment, cut its stockpile of enriched uranium, and allow extensive international inspection to verify these actions.

To get this deal, negotiators had to focus on forestalling Iran's nuclear breakout temporarily (via 10- and 15-year sunset clauses) rather than preventing it entirely and permanently. They did so intending to **return to the negotiation table** after signing the deal. Incremental and successive negotiations have often been a successful strategy for achieving broader arms control outcomes.

Iran's compliance with the agreement's provisions would be verified by rigorous inspections (the most intrusive negotiated within an arms control agreement to date), with sanctions that would "snap back" in the case of noncompliance. This was a nuance unique to the deal: Normally, arms control treaties do not include consequences, but simply provisions for withdrawal that can be invoked if, for example, the other side is suspected of noncompliance. The snap-back provision added an element of robustness to the treaty, making it more likely to remain in force if a violation were detected.

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In 2018, however, the United States **withdrew from the JCPOA** under the first Trump administration. President Trump, at the time, **said** that the deal's sunset provisions and exclusive focus on Iran's enrichment capability—setting aside its missile program and role in regional dynamics—made the deal "horrible" and "defective at its core," adding that the US administration vowed to pursue a "real, comprehensive, and lasting solution to the Iranian nuclear threat." The United States also invoked the JCPOA's snap-back mechanism to reimpose sanctions in 2020. These US actions not only reignited tensions between Washington and Tehran but also strained relationships with European allies who invested diplomatic capital in the agreement.

In February, the White House announced the administration's plan to revert to its previous "**maximum pressure**" campaign for Iran. This policy includes revoking sanctions waivers, reducing Iran's oil exports to zero, diplomatically isolating Iran, preventing Iran from evading sanctions, and countering its malign regional influence—while also seeking a new arms control deal to replace the JCPOA. Trump's approach then and now was meant to appear strong, comprehensive, and in contrast to the negotiated settlement the Obama administration had reached in 2015. But by refusing to accept a **functional deal**—albeit imperfect and suboptimal—the Trump administration shows a broader unwillingness to engage with the messy reality of how diplomacy works and the need to make compromises to achieve progress.

Returning to the table. Given the need for a new deal in the next six months—before Iran reaches a critical threshold for nuclear breakout—the administration should avoid the all-or-nothing, maximalist negotiating style of President Trump. Approaching the negotiations by trying to force total capitulation in the form of complete denuclearization via "**zero enrichment**" is likely to fail—just like it did with **North Korea**. Insisting on a deal with no sunset provisions will also be a non-starter, particularly given Iran's nuclear progress since 2018. Iran is likely to agree to more modest limitations, for example, on uranium enrichment, and only, once again, on a limited timeline.

The United States is less likely to get as comprehensive a deal as the last one: Tehran does not seem ready to agree to a deal that restricts its nuclear program as much as the JCPOA did. Worse, the additional issues the Trump administration hopes to capture in a new agreement could impede negotiations: Overly broad ambitions or negotiation agendas will likely preclude the successful negotiation of a new agreement.

The breadth that President Trump seeks by pursuing a deal that includes restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile program and prohibitions on support for proxy groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen—in addition to restrictions on uranium enrichment—will likely hamper the process, augment uncertainty and complexity, and drag out the negotiations. Such a broad set of outcomes is more likely achieved as the product of successive arms control negotiations that incrementally build on shared ideas born of shared ideas and growing trust. The United States is not in a strong position here right now: Withdrawing from an agreement is the least likely way to get your negotiating partners to have faith in your sincerity the next time around.

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Embrace complexity and think long-term. Foreign policy generally thrives in gray areas and requires a complex approach to international relations that seeks a delicate balance between deterrence and diplomacy, pressure and persuasion, and competition and cooperation. Achieving this balance often takes patience and time.

Effective diplomacy also requires compromise. The current US administration increasingly dismisses balance and compromise in favor of isolated, decisive gambits that seek immediate “wins” and show a growing impatience for complexity, as US officials seek quick fixes and simplified narratives.

At home, Americans also **increasingly embrace a simplified worldview** shaped by the ethos of “winners” and “losers,” leaving little room for balance found by meeting in the middle. The United States’ growing obsession with clear-cut victories has permeated foreign policy, culture, and politics. With US foreign policy positions smacking of absolutism, the pursuit of total victory often comes at the expense of long-term stability. This approach to foreign policy represents not just a break from traditional diplomatic norms (as intended; the disruption is by design), but also a broader trend in global politics: The growing tendency is to avoid complex, long-term risks in favor of short-term, highly visible “wins.” The consequences of this cultural shift are particularly alarming in foreign policy, as the erosion of trust in alliances and institutions creates strategic vulnerabilities.

Foreign policy is not *The Apprentice* or any other reality show with clear winners and losers. It is a continuous process of negotiation and adjustment that requires patience and a willingness to engage with complexity. An obsession with “winning” undermines the deep, slow work of alliance-building and reduces the flexibility of US foreign policy, a fundamental feature to cope with the increasing uncertainty in international relations.

To address the growing nuclear threat from Iran, the United States must return to the negotiation table, ready to compromise rather than issue ultimatums and to prioritize gradual progress over triumphant finales. Embracing diplomatic complexity and patience is essential for transforming discord into dialogue and achieving lasting security.